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World Children's Festival: The Art of Empathy

Abstract

The International Child Art Foundation (ICAF) brings about positive change through its national and global programs, traveling exhibitions, conferences and events, and the World Children's Festival (WCF). The Arts Olympiad is the ICAF's flagship program. Like the Olympics, the Arts Olympiad has a four year cycle. It commences in classrooms with structured lesson plans that introduce students to the "Artist-Athlete Ideal" of the creative mind and healthy body. The self-image as "artist-athlete" solidifies when a child renders it into a personal work of art. In the second year, local exhibitions provide communities an opportunity to celebrate the creativity and artistic talents of their children, and to select the winners to represent their school district or country at the WCF. The WCF in the third year provides a global community setting for the development of empathy, so the children grow up to be creative and empathetic global leaders. In the fourth and final year, the International Arts Olympiad Exhibition travels to major venues to grow awareness of the importance of fostering creativity and empathy in world, with children as the catalysts.

Author/Artist Bio

Dr. Ishaq is an experienced entrepreneur, educator, manager, researcher, and civil-sector leader. He holds a Ph.D. in economics from the George Washington University, where he later served as adjunct associate professor of economics. He began his professional career at the World Bank, analyzing industry projects and conducting research on entrepreneurship. During that time he co-authored 'Success in Small & Medium Scale Enterprises' (Oxford University Press, 1987). His recent book is 'The Creativity Revolution: Reinvent Your Creative Self to Shape the Future and Prosper' (ICAF Print, 2013). In 1997 he founded the International Child Art Foundation to nurture creativity and develop empathy in the world's children through the power of the arts. The Arts Olympiad program he developed has grown into the world's largest and most prestigious art and sport program for children. As a cultural leader, Dr. Ishaq holds the distinction of organizing and producing the first national children's art festival in U.S. history, which was held in Washington, D.C. in 1998. Since 1999, he has produced the World Children's Festival every four years as the "Olympics" of children's imagination and co-creation. He secured an exclusive license from the United States Olympic Committee for the ICAF to use "Arts Olympiad" and related marks. To date, more than five-million children worldwide have benefited from the Arts Olympiads. Since 1998, nearly one million people have participated in the festivals and exhibitions hosted by the ICAF and its national partners. www.icaf.org

Keywords

empathy, festival, STEM, STEAMS, art program

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World Children's Festival: The Art of Empathy

Ashfaq Ishaq

How do you develop empathy in Washington in a couple of hundred 9 to 12-year olds, roughly one-half from the US and the other from seventy countries, within three days?



These creative kids are official delegates to the 5th World Children's Festival (WCF) held on June 30th to July 2nd of 2015 on the Ellipse, just south of the White House. They are accompanied by their parents or schoolteachers and a few come with their grandparents too. Intercultural empathy does not come easy and yet it is more essential today than ever before. Hence, the WCF must provide a transformative experience that can become a touchstone in the lives of these young people. What they learn in Washington should inspire them to alter their

prejudices and perspectives. These delegates were selected because of their artistic creativity through the Arts Olympiad—the world’s largest art program for schoolchildren. But once they leave Washington, they should always think of themselves as empathic-creators.

Every four years since 1999, I have produced the WCF on the National Mall as the “Olympics” of children’s imagination. Each WCF is different—a new generation of kids, new conflicts and geopolitics, greater love or deeper hatred for the US, and a sharply increasing use of digital technologies in everyday life and learning. The 2015 WCF was also different in a physical sense. It took place on the Ellipse, also known as the President’s Park, because the area of the Mall between the National Air and Space Museum and the National Gallery of Art where four previous



WCFs were held was undergoing turf restoration. I had purposefully chosen the festival dates (June 30th to July 3rd) so that following the Awards Gala on July 3rd at the Marriott, delegates could experience the American Independence Day celebrations on the Mall and enjoy the fireworks at night before departing for home the following morning.

The WCF is free and open to the public, so thousands of tourists and DC area residents can pour in to attend the various workshops and scores of activities hosted by educators and experts. Some came from the various UG government departments and agencies, whereas some from traveled from places as far away as Argentina, Nigeria or Australia. The workshops ranged from calligraphy, decomposing, paper marbling, and playwriting to coding, graphics, mathematics, and watchmaking. Participants could also do yoga, play a sport or exercise. Entertainment at the WCF takes place on the “World Stage” where performing artists from schools across the US and around the world are selected to showcase their talents. The tourists and delegates intently watch the intercultural performances, some raise their cell phones to film the entire show. Among the favorites this WCF were the Maori kids from New Zealand, the blind musicians from Zimbabwe, the Tennessee Children's Dance Ensemble, and the young performers from Azerbaijan and Uganda

Creativity and the Arts

I had begun my career at the World Bank in 1980 as part of a core team conducting seminal studies on entrepreneurship. My econometric analyses uncovered the importance of creativity and ideation as critical for success in business. A question arose as to why far more adults are not creative, when as children we all are innately so. I found a scientific explanation in the studies of E. Paul Torrance (‘father of creativity’) who had discovered the “4th-grade slump” in children's

creativity. I came to believe that this slump was a roadblock to human creative development and an impediment to sustainable prosperity and peace-building.

As an economist, I searched for an effective and least-cost approach to optimize a child's creative potential around the ages of 8 to 12. For my target age group, STEM disciplines rarely allow self-expression and conveyance of ideas or imagination. Students must first learn and memorize the formulae, protocols and rules, which may require several years of instruction. STEM disciplines are essential for understanding and improving the physical world. But when it comes to the nonphysical, human factors, what cannot be proven are often explained away as caused by epigenetics, environment or other exogenous factors. The arts in contrast offer a child the canvas or platform to express his or her thoughts and emotions. A child can paint the subliminal, color the obscure, or sketch the unknown. But the arts are also not enough because children learn through play as well and sports build perseverance, team work, and competitive vigor. So I developed the concept of STEAMS education to art and culture (the "A") and sport and play (the second "S") with STEM disciplines for children's holistic development.



My linking of art with economic prosperity through human creative development I assumed would be most useful for the American Child Art Foundation, but no such entity existed. There was no global arts organization either for children's creative development. Arts educators had their own national associations and art patrons their own country clubs, but neither had ever focused exclusively on the children and fostering their creative development. How could I, a Muslim immigrant from Pakistan, forsake my career for the sake of art and the children? For the next several years I remained preoccupied with building my advisory business but the gaping hole in extant institutions kept staring at me from the void. Finally in 1997, my wife and I shut down our business and instead established the International Child Art Foundation (ICAF) as a charitable organization.

We developed the Arts Olympiad, a global program with a four-year cycle like the Olympics. In the first year, intervention takes place in schools with structured lesson plans which are provided free of charge to art teachers by the ICAF. Students produce original artworks on specified themes as part of a school art contest, which leads to the selection of the school's Arts Olympiad winner. In the second year, regional or national exhibitions of local winners' masterpieces are arranged to provide communities an opportunity to celebrate their children's creativity. In the third year, the WCF provides a setting of global community to celebrate creativity, diversity, and unity. In the fourth and final year, the International Arts Olympiad Exhibition, which made its debut at the WCF, travels to host cities to grow public awareness of the importance of children's creative education.

Using snail mail in those early years we invited schools in every US state and territory and the ministries of education or culture in over one hundred foreign countries. We had no idea if anyone would show an interest. The response to the First Arts Olympiad amazed us. We began

receiving incredible artworks, each masterpiece more amazing than the one that came earlier. Schools across the US and in ninety countries participated. In 1998, we produced the first ever national arts festival in US history, which set the stage for the 1999 WCF in which delegates from 78 countries participated. The WCF became a showcase for my STEAMS Education.

Creativity's Moral Neutrality

I happened to be attending a conference in midtown-Manhattan on September 11, 2001 and never could have imagined how dark that sunny day would become for the US and the world, and for American-Muslims like myself. Witnessing from the city's otherwise grand avenues, the terrorists' creative use of US-made airplanes to destroy the World Trade Center and kill nearly 3,000 civilians profoundly altered my own thinking. I understood that instant what poets and sages had known through the ages—that human creative endeavors can bring heaven on earth or create a living hell. I realized that human creativity was morally neutral; it could do harm or good. I was devoting my life to foster children's creativity without knowing what they would eventually do with it. Will they blossom into another Einstein or Mother Teresa or become another Osama or Madoff? What could make creativity positive, so that it always advances human civilization? Empathy. Derived from *emfühlung* (literally “feeling into” something), empathy describes what a person might feel when viewing another's painting, since the aesthetic pleasure of art arises from taking in or “feeling into” the work. Because empathy was rooted in the arts, I could employ the power of the arts to provide children a vicarious experience of the feelings of others, and at its finest, those of their presumed enemies.

Research on creativity and empathy, and measurement of both, had begun in earnest by mid-twentieth century, but the importance of creativity and empathy or their interconnections was

not yet fully understood. Identifying the neural, cognitive, motivational, and emotional correlates of creativity and empathy are for the neuroscientists to discover—my task was simply to foster both. Eventually I developed a Peace through Art methodology, which I used the following year in a program involving Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot youth. For Christian-Muslim rapprochement, Cyprus was the test case in the region because without peace on that small divided island, atavism will keep reigniting the dreams of the crusaders and the nightmares of those colonized. The UK's leading medical journal The Lancet invited me to write on my methodology, which I did. I then restructured the educational programming of the next WCF on the Mall on September 9th to 11th of 2003. On the festival's last day, the Mayor of the District of Columbia issue an official proclamation designating September 11, 2003 as "Children's Peace Day."



Empathy as Transformation

The main objectives were now clear. While the Arts Olympiad fosters creativity in classrooms, the WCF develops empathy in Washington. Empathic development took place in five stages as described below:

a) Disrupt the transgenerational transmission of trauma and hatred

A supposition that every child is traumatized in some way is reasonable in today's world. If not through direct experiences of a conflict zone, a child could develop cognitive dissonance when conflating the nativism at home with a desire to become a global citizen. A lesson that I had drawn from the peace-building program was to separate the children from their parents (and grandparents), if just for the art therapy sessions. These sessions helped the young to become open to the possibilities that lay ahead for them at the WCF on the Mall. Art therapy also healed the old, so they could embrace the larger world instead of always fearing it. Art therapy cannot take place on the Mall, where tourists and DC residents can flood in, upsetting the sessions. Art therapy takes place in a hotel conference room reserved for the delegates. On this first day, the delegates get to meet each other, even paint and draw together, testing art as a universal language to communicate with their peers who do not share the same language. By the day's end, they realize they have much in common, despite the apparent differences. A feeling that they must try to view things differently sparks within them.

b) Gain confidence

By the age of twelve or so, children are generally familiar with events that adults organize for them, where the children cannot speak their minds and if an adult briefly

places the microphone in front of their faces, it is hesitatingly so and could be withdrawn abruptly. Right from the onset, every child realizes that the WCF is different. Children their age or slightly older (the ICAF Youth Board Members, who had participated in previous WCFs) stage and emcee the WCF. Some host their own workshops or activities. The 'World Stage' on the Mall is for children alone. They are the talents. They are the celebrities. The WCF opens with the Health & Environment Day, with workshops and activities relating to concerns that children share. This commonality of interests develops a sense of community and self-confidence.

c) Develop trust

The following day is called the "Creativity & Imagination Day." On this day, all workshops and activities focus on the children's own potential and prospects. Children come to understand their creativity, learn how to enhance their potential, and explore ways in which they could use their talents to be most successful in life. Though they were invited because of their artistic talents, at the WCF they can attend a workshop on science or medicine and hands-on activities on engineering or mathematics. Children meet educators from across America and many different countries. They meet professionals of all kinds, from architects to zoologists. By the end of the day, an understanding grows in a delegate that personal creativity can be applied to any field or domain, be it in business or government, in Silicon Valley or Detroit. They meet Olympians, yoga masters, and PE instructors, and can play or exercise with them. This day the delegates develop trust in themselves, in others, and in the larger world. They can start thinking creatively about solutions to problems their communities face and the world as a whole.

d) Be the change-makers

The third and final day on the Mall is “Peace & Leadership Day.” All workshops and activities now focus on interpersonal relations, peaceful resolution of conflicts, and leadership training. With confidence and trust, the delegates become prepared as global citizens, with empathy towards others and yet not any less patriotic than earlier. To collectively participate in activities such as mural-making, they co-imagine and then co-create works and realize they can create masterpieces. Such exercises become building blocks for future collaborative innovation. From the many activities and workshops, delegates learn that creativity and empathy are key attributes of successful learners and leaders.

e) Celebrate the future

Following three days of educational festivities on the Mall, the delegates are honored at the World Children’s Awards Banquet at the Marriott Ballroom. Once they receive their certificates of exceptional creativity and empathic understanding, the tables turn, and the youth take over. The ICAF Youth Board Members invite the delegates they have selected as new members of the ICAF Youth Board. Then together they select educators, ICAF country partners and WCF sponsors for the World Children’s Awards, which were instituted at the 2007 WCF and presented to LEGO. The 2015 WCF awardees included the Akira Foundation and Swatch.. Collective decision-making prepares the delegates to become responsible like never before. The future is in their hands and they can shape better tomorrows.

Each WCF prepares a cadre of empathic creators who are inspired and prepared to bring about positive social change in their communities. They can garner support from each other because they know they have a global network of peers with whom they have shared the WCF's transformative experience. Such a bottom-up approach to change, not ever possible before, creates a most authentic grassroots movement to make our imperfect human race worthy of this perfect planet—a lonely, pale blue dot in the universe.